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AUTHOR Southern, W. Thomas
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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the potential pitfalls in evaluating the effectiveness of gifted education programs and applies recent trends in the assessment and maintenance of quality in industrial applications. Evaluators are encouraged to avoid the temptations of bad evaluation which may appear to offer simpler alternatives to complex tasks but actually disguises results and fails to provide decision makers with appropriate information. Examples of bad evaluation include asking the wrong questions (e.g., use of standardized test data to support program effectiveness and failure to consider unique local factors); asking too few questions (evaluators need to be alert to unintentional program outcomes); and viewing results of evaluation as a summary judgment rather than a guide for action and refinement. Ideas of industrial quality theorist W. Edward Deming are summarized and applied to improvement and assessment of gifted programs with the following recommended commitments by school districts: service to all identified gifted students which focuses on students' individual needs; constant improvement of services; use of evaluation data to meet these first two commitments; data collection keyed to program goals; collection of as much information as possible; and information dissemination to decision makers and others who might profit from it. (5 references) (DB)

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Lead Us Not Into Temptation: Issues in Evaluating the Effectiveness of Gifted Programs

W. Thomas Southern — *Associate Professor, Department of Special Education, Bowling Green State University* and *Director of the Ohio Site for Project SPRING (Special Population Resource Information Network for Gifted)*

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Introduction

Certainly, it is important to ask program providers about the effectiveness of programs for the gifted. In this field, as in the field of general education, this question is becoming increasingly important. Moreover, the groups asking this question include not only the consumers of gifted education — parents and students — but also funding agencies, state and federal lawmakers, business and industry, and the local community itself.

The trend of evaluation is healthy for the field of gifted education. Too often, in the past, the need to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of programs has been ignored. Educators often lacked the vision to measure their objectives or lacked the courage to look at their performance. The current social and political climate will not allow educators to ignore these requests any longer.

Besides the obvious necessity to determine the effectiveness of programs for the gifted for the benefit of students, self-interest demands that educators evaluate what they are doing. In a time of shrinking resources and reallocation of priorities, educators must prove to their constituents that programs for the gifted are important and valuable. If they do not, they may find themselves without programs at all.

In attempting to comply with requests to monitor the effectiveness of programs, educators must be careful to avoid conducting evaluations that ask the wrong questions, oversimplify results, or are so tightly constrained in the information considered that the real goals and objectives are overlooked. The evaluation of gifted programs has, in the past, largely been characterized by these sorts of inadequacies. This is perhaps because doing a bad job of evaluation is vastly easier than doing a good job. There are some fairly seductive temptations that lure evaluators from providing meaningful assessments of program effectiveness.

It is the goal of this chapter to examine the potential pitfalls in evaluating program effectiveness, which not only may weaken the value of our information but also can threaten the existence of the programs themselves. In light of knowledge about these pitfalls, some recent trends in the assessment and maintenance of quality in industrial applications will be presented. Some suggestions about how districts should respond to demands for evaluation will be offered. The consequences of failure to address the issues raised about program effectiveness will also be discussed.

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The Temptations of Bad Evaluation

As mentioned earlier, there are a number of temptations that beset the evaluator. Some arise from a desire to please those who demand evaluation, while others arise from faulty assumptions about the purposes of evaluation. Some temptations are appealing because they appear to offer simpler alternatives to complex tasks. In every case, however, the results of such evaluations disguise results and do not provide decision makers with appropriate information.

Asking the Wrong Questions

There is a relatively obvious problem that arises in evaluation: If you ask the wrong question, you will not get a useful answer. In some ways, it is akin to the man who searched for his lost keys under a street lamp because the light was better there than where he dropped them. There are several reasons why the wrong questions are asked.

Sometimes, educators attempt to please an audience that demands program evaluation. The state legislature or the local board of education may ask for effectiveness data that will justify the expense and resources the program uses. They often couch the demand in terms of standardized test performance or normative comparisons. Their request is understandable because aptitude and achievement test scores are widely available and are assumed to be easily understood.

People also are aware that programs for the gifted deal with cognitive enhancement and that some tests provide data that deal with academic ability and attainment. However, reliance on test data alone ignores several problems in using these types of tests with gifted students:

- Gifted students score at ceiling levels and are unlikely to show growth.
- The tests rarely reflect the goals, objectives, or curriculum in the gifted program.
- The tests provide no information about the source and process of learning.

These data sometimes appear to be acceptable because the numbers generated comply with the agency demands for evaluation, but they provide little or no information about actual program effectiveness. Evaluators have told their audience what they seemed to ask but not what they really need to know.

Sometimes the wrong questions are asked because the unique contexts in which programs operate are ignored. In effect, many of the current schemes for evaluation of educational progress fall into this trap. Because programs for the gifted address the needs of students and because student needs differ according to the demographics and resources of each district, evaluation must be sensitive to these differences. Urban and rural school districts have different programs because their students have different needs, and each district has different resources to address those needs.

In an inner city school district, for example, an important goal of the program for the gifted might be the identification of special populations of gifted students. As a result, program options and offerings might have a very different look from a small city or rural programs. In a rural area, on the other hand, a program goal might be to address the lack of experiences available to gifted students. The programs there might include options for obtaining access to information and resources unavailable in the local community. While both of these locations might be concerned with keeping talented students in school or accelerating and enriching their

experiences, the approach either district might take would differ based on the specific reasons gifted students drop out of school.

Contexts also generate unique goals and objectives. While it may seem trivially obvious, the goals and objectives of a program should be examined in any effort to assess effectiveness. Yet, as stated earlier, compliance with funding or regulatory groups' requests may lead to evaluation based on what others think may be valuable. Instead, the priorities and values of the local community should be examined first. The suitability of program goals should be identified and reviewed. Then information that can help determine how effectively these goals are being met should be collected.

The wrong questions also are asked because the desired results are oversimplified. It is assumed, for example, that program objectives for gifted students are neatly packaged into academic goals, affective goals, and social goals. In reality, the situation is far more complex. These areas are interlocked and synergistic. The intellectual gifts or talents of students may facilitate or hinder achievement of other goals. Writers may be self-absorbed and single-minded in pursuit of their craft. Artists may reject social norms and break cultural taboos. Heightened sensitivity, feelings of alienation, or perfectionism are not isolated, unidimensional symptoms that need to be addressed. They are syndromes that include all the elements of a student's intellectual, social, and emotional maturity. Program effectiveness cannot adequately be assessed with unidimensional scales and a few test results, regardless of how tempting it may be to adopt designs that rely solely on such results.

Asking Too Few Questions

Still another temptation for an evaluator lies in asking too few questions. Programs for the gifted are information-rich environments. Faced with the complexity of the settings, evaluators ask relatively few, easily digested questions. Interactions among students and between students and teachers — such as the kind of processes exhibited in classrooms, mentor relationships, and the articulation of programs into regular classroom offerings — offer a mass of data that are useful for evaluation but are often lost, ignored, or uncollected. Sometimes data are not used because they do not fit an overly rigid evaluation design.

Guba and Lincoln (1981) claimed that evaluators who are not attuned to look for "serendipitous" or unintentional outcomes miss some of the most important program achievements. At other times, the information is overlooked because it does not fit the prejudices of the evaluator. Information about dropouts from programs, for example, is often uncollected or ignored, perhaps because such data may be viewed as threatening (Callahan & Hunsaker, 1991). Still other evaluators feel that responsive designs are too subjective and "unscientific." In any case, the unanticipated results of program intervention may have far more beneficial impact than the goals the program was designed to meet. Ignoring evidence because it does not fit preconceptions or assumptions may lead to a distorted view of gifted programs and the loss of valuable program components.

The Pitfall of Summary Judgment

The final and perhaps most dangerous pitfall for assessment of program effectiveness is to view the results of evaluation as a summary judgment rather than a guide for action and refinement. Assessing program effectiveness should be viewed as a sample of a program's current functioning and as a guide for improving services. This view of evaluation, often referred to as formative evaluation (Scriven, 1967), has as its purpose the collection of

information for the purpose of program improvement. Summative judgment is only appropriate if program systems have reached some fixed state of development. Programs for gifted students never reach that state. They must continually develop and respond to changing community contexts and evolving student needs.

Improvement and Assessment of Program Effectiveness

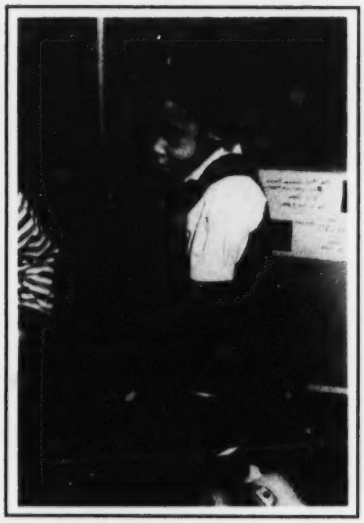
Good intentions, confusion, rigidity of design, and even laziness are factors that can subvert appropriate assessment of the effectiveness of programs for the gifted. What then can be done to guard against the temptations of bad evaluation?

Recently, America has faced challenges from foreign competitors who have provided consumers with products of higher quality at competitive prices. American business and industry has begun to respond by adopting competitors' methods to achieve and maintain quality production. One of the most influential theorists in this area is J. Edward Deming, architect of much of Japan's post-war industrial resurgence and after whom Japan's highest award for industrial quality is named. It is informative to note two of Deming's key points for change (Deming, 1986):

- A commitment must be made for continual improvement of the quality of goods or services.
- Quality is not a target that one hits, but a goal toward which an organization must constantly strive.

The parallel for gifted programs is that educators must realize that services to gifted students must be monitored and assessed continually.

Deming also asserted that an organization is a system of production or service delivery. The components of that system include mangers, workers, suppliers, and customers. The products of the system are governed not by individuals but by the variability of the system itself. A worker, or in this case a teacher, has no capacity to alter the products without basic changes to the system. In Deming's view, assigning merit or blame to individuals is meaningless and counterproductive. Instead, information should be used by workers and managers to alter the system to achieve ever-increasing quality. Information must flow to all parts of the system, and all workers must have input into the mechanism for change. Suppliers and customers also need to be informed and asked for comments.



In the same way, Deming suggested that management by objective and the setting of numerical quotas and guidelines do nothing to achieve quality. No matter how well-intentioned, they only engender fear and confusion on the part of the workers. Recent efforts in education to find universal statistics for comparison of one district with another, or the exhortations to achieve some numerical goal without systematic change, seemed doomed to failure. What will happen, according to Deming, is the increasing frustration of educators who, despite their best and most well-intentioned efforts, cannot make the current system meet the goals for either regular education or for programs for the gifted. In the same way, systems are unique. Comparison of outcomes from one district to another will similarly result in districts being tagged as winners or losers without regard to their actual attainments.

This is not to say that Deming ignored numerical data. Quite the contrary, his system was based on the analysis of quantitative information. His point, and one that is invaluable for assessing the effectiveness of gifted programs, was that the data should flow to all the constituents of the

system. Furthermore, the data should be used to provide information to persons trying to make decisions about program improvement, what Renzulli (1975) called action and decision makers. Teachers, administrators, parents, and students need to have access to evaluation data in order to improve program quality.

Commitment to Assessing Program Effectiveness

Deming's points suggest that if districts wish to avoid pitfalls and do an adequate job of evaluation, they must make a few simple commitments:

- *The district must serve all identified gifted students at every grade level, and services should be directed toward the individual needs of each student.* Programs will differ as each district differs in its context and student needs, but this commitment will be constant.
- *Services will be constantly improved for every identified student.* As Deming says, quality is not a target that one hits but is a goal toward which an organization must constantly strive. As gifted programs develop, student needs will evolve. The definition of quality service needs to evolve similarly.
- *Evaluation data will be used to meet these first two commitments.* The purpose of evaluation is not the summative judgment about the achievements of any program or program component. Instead, evaluation is a source of information used to strive toward service that is responsive to student needs and is the means to assess the current progress of the program toward quality.
- *The data collected will provide information keyed to program goals, and every effort will be made to gather as much information as possible.* This requires that all of the suppliers, customers, workers, and managers in the system (parents, community, business, students in and out of the program, school staff, teachers, and administrators) be involved. While some of this information may include locally developed and nationally standardized test results, it will also include information from discussions and surveys of all the groups mentioned above. Each of these constituents has a unique view of what is working in the system, where potential problem areas lie, and where priorities lie for change.
- *Information collected will be disseminated to decision makers and to all the audiences who might profit from it.* Evaluation data that flow only to regulators or that result in summative judgments or meaningless exhortations to do better are worse than useless. Such data only function to generate fear and confusion among those who are responsible for carrying out the improvement of the program.

The Future

The field of gifted education has not had a particularly good record in conducting the kind of evaluation of program effectiveness that these commitments would guarantee. As a consequence, educators face some difficult questions from legislators, businessmen, community leaders, parents, and students. If they continue to ignore these questions, it is practically inevitable that the level of service to gifted students will be reduced or that control of these programs will be lost to those posing the questions. Equally disturbing, however, is the prospect of acceding to the requests in a way that provides useless and misleading information.

If educators are forced to provide only the information about effectiveness that is currently being required, two things will happen. The first is that the scope and vision of programming will be reduced to the limits imposed by standardized test results and numerical quotas. The second is that educators will be unable to demonstrate the extent and interrelationship of

other needs to the point that these needs will no longer be valued as goals for programming. A lesser vision of needs will result in programs that have lower priority and almost certainly lower positive benefits. Ultimately, programs will be less effective at achieving even more minimal goals.

In either case, it will be the students who are penalized. Educators have the responsibility to educate as well as evaluate. Programs that are effective do far more than raise test scores or teach knowledge and skills. It is up to each educator to design evaluations that illustrate the needs of gifted students and that assess the effectiveness of programs in meeting all of those needs.

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